

Dear Friend:

To offer hope to people who have mental illnesses, and to educate the public that recovery and a full and productive life in the community are possible for those with mental illnesses, we invite you to share a brief story from your past or present—that is, an anecdote describing a turning point or a summary of a significant period in your life — that illustrates your recovery from mental illness.

Because there is more stigma and discrimination associated with mental illnesses among people in diverse cultural, ethnic, racial, and gender groups, we are interested in the stories of people from these communities. However, whether or not you identify as being a member of these diverse communities, we are interested in your story.

These stories will be used to put a positive face on the experience of mental illness and to inspire others with the hope of recovery. Examples of success and “positive visibility” will counter the negative stereotypes of people who have mental illnesses, and help re-orient service systems to a focus on recovery outcomes. The text may be used in whole or edited into a short, concise version. The media in which your story may be used include but are not limited to the Elimination of Barriers Initiative (EBI) Web site, the Resource Center to Address Discrimination and Stigma (ADS Center) Web site, and the National Anti-Stigma Campaign Web site and project activities.

To give you an idea of the kinds of stories we are seeking, I offer an example by Sam Harris, director of the Chester City Consumer Center, a program of the Mental Health Association of Southeastern Pennsylvania:

At the age of 14, I started having serious hallucinations and blackouts. I'm half African American and half Native American, and I didn't try to get help because, in both communities, they called that “going to the white man.” But I became an outcast, because my symptoms got so bad that none of my friends wanted to have anything to do with me.

Instead, I lived with these symptoms for four years. My mental illness got so bad that I couldn't cope with school and they asked me to leave. I went to Miami to live with my father, but he threw me out; and from the age of 15 until I was 18 I lived on the streets of Miami, with constant hallucinations and delusions.

At 19, I joined the military. But I was still sick and, after basic training, they gave me an honorable discharge and directed me to get mental health treatment, so I did. After taking medication and seeing therapists, I went back to work two years later, as a cook. Four years after that, I got an associate's degree from the Restaurant School of Philadelphia and became a chef.

I worked as a chef for about 15 years. But there was a lot of stigma around mental illness in the restaurant business. Every restaurant I worked at, I saw other people disclose about themselves and they wound up being badly harassed and losing their jobs. So I hid my illness.

In 1995 I started working part time for the Chester City Consumer Center. After attending the Center for six months, I had asked the director if there were openings and she said she had wanted to hire me for the last six months. I'm still at the Center, now as its director, and it will be 10 years in November. Working with the Mental Health Association of Southeastern Pennsylvania, which is out there advocating for consumers, has helped me. Until I started working here, I felt like no one really cared.

This story is 336 words; please limit your story to 350 words or less. If we find it necessary to edit your story for length or style, we will share the final edited version with you for your approval. Although our intention is to protect your vignette from further revisions, we cannot guarantee that your vignette will not be edited by the press or outside partners.

Following are some questions to think about as you write your story:

- What did you go through in dealing with mental health problems?
- What specifically helped to facilitate your recovery?
- How has your life improved since you have entered a state of recovery? What have you accomplished?
- Did you experience any discrimination or stigma on the path to recovery, e.g., in the workplace or in school? How did you overcome it?
- Have you been able to help others in their recovery? How?
- How would you change the mental health system or society in general to promote recovery?
- How has life in the community supported your recovery?
- Has recovery helped you to re-enter the community?
- Why have you chosen to self-disclose?

Also, it would be wonderful if you could provide some details about your life in general (outside of the mental health arena). For example:

- Do you work and, if so, in what field?
- What are your interests?
- Are you married?
- Do you have children?
- Do you have a college degree or any advanced degrees?
- Are you involved in any civic or charitable causes?

We want to illustrate the fact that people who have mental illnesses can and do recover from them, have interests and abilities, and contribute to the community.

Please either e-mail or mail your story to:

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MHASP/Vignettes
1211 Chestnut Street, 11th Floor
Philadelphia, PA 19107
dsherman@mhasp.org

Please also sign the consent form and mail it back to Denise. If possible, please provide a photo, preferably in color. If you send a photograph through the mail, please be aware that we will not be able to return it to you.

We will notify you if your story has been selected for inclusion on our Web site or in one of the other media described above. We hope to feature stories from a diverse range of communities, including various geographic and racial/ethnic groups and both genders.

The report of the President's New Freedom Commission on Mental Health states, "Because recovery will be the common, recognized outcome of mental health services, the stigma surrounding mental illnesses will be reduced, reinforcing the hope of recovery for every individual with a mental illness." However you define recovery—whether as a complete absence of symptoms or (as Dr. William Anthony, who heads Boston University's Center for Psychiatric Rehabilitation, has defined it) as "a way of living a satisfying, hopeful, and contributing life even with limitations caused by illness"—please help us spread this message!

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at 800-688-4226, ext. 288, or by e-mail at srogers@mhasp.org.

Thanks in advance for your contribution,

Susan Rogers
Director of Special Projects
Mental Health Association of Southeastern Pennsylvania